Where Are Our Civil Unrest Commemorative Markers?

Abstract

This essay is about the need to mark the locations of important civil unrests in Singapore. We hope that by marking these riot locations, we can enhance the message about the dangers of civil unrests.

Existing WWII heritage markers play an important role in sharpening the message on the need for security and defence. In contrast to this, we realised that no civil unrest commemorative markers exist although the history of civil unrests is an important part of our nation-building journey.

A secondary school student would have encountered the stories of civil unrests in Singapore either in lower secondary History or Upper Secondary Social Studies classes. However, we realised we did not know the locations of the present sites of these important riots. To our surprise, we discovered that many of our peers also did not know where these riots occurred. And no markers exist to identify these riots locations either.

Through this research, we hope that more can be done to keep alive the memories of the people who experienced these riots. A civil unrest commemorative marker at the sites of the riots can serve to remind us to preserve our social cohesion because civil unrests can still haunt and destroy us as a nation.
The Danger of Civil Unrests

Civil unrests can bring about social instability to our society. It can claim lives of the innocent. It can destroy the peace and progress that Singaporeans have built in this country. It can take away the very things that we Singaporeans love today. It is the duty of every Singaporean to be aware of our past conflicts and ensure that such conflicts will not happen again.

Preserving important lessons from history

A country is defined by its cherished traditions and shared memories that run deep through our heartland. These are the defining moments that shape the beliefs of a nation. As young citizens who will inherit this nation, we will not want the national identity that our pioneers and predecessors have built to crumble.

How can we preserve this social cohesion and national identity from the divisive forces and fault lines of race and religion? We believe that one of the ways is to bring the reality of past civil unrests into our present landscape by establishing markers of these riots. In so doing, we hope that citizens and residents of Singapore will be able to immediately remember and readily identify with the event, much more directly than reading it in a text or vaguely recalling having heard of the event.

For example, Singaporeans today can easily understand and appreciate the fact that Singapore needs to safeguard against terrorism when they see the heritage marker put up outside Macdonald House in Orchard Road. This marker was erected to commemorate the Konfrontasi attacks on Singapore. The marker is an apt reminder to Singaporeans that what happened in the past can happen again if we do not make diligent efforts to preserve the peace we have today.

Existing Heritage Markers

The Japanese Occupation was a significant event that had haunted the lives of Singaporeans from 1942. As such, a notable effort has been made by the National Heritage Board (NHB) to commemorate this significant event in Singapore history.

As of 2014, the NHB put up 20 WWII heritage markers at sites where important WWII battles and events occurred. WWII trails were also developed to provide opportunities for Singaporeans and

1 - http://www.nhb.gov.sg/NHBPortal/Trails/WorldWarITrail/WorldWarITrail-Overview
Visitors to understand the story of WWII in Singapore.

Heritage plaques are still added to existing war site markers, such as the newly installed Rimau 10 Execution Site situated at Dover Road in 2012 (see below). It is evident that WWII heritage markers can generate interest about social values in historical experiences. In the process, the local history of WWII is also made accessible and more engaging.

Given that lessons of war and security can be learned from location heritage markers, it is possible that the stories of civil unrests in Singapore can also be communicated and remembered in the same way through site markers.

**Awareness of Civil Unrests**

Shortly after we finalised our research question, we wanted to know if there was good general knowledge about the riots and where they took place. So we carried out a short survey with people aged between 12 to 38. We asked questions about the awareness of the locations of event markers such as Chinatown’s Sook Ching Centre Marker at Hong Lim Complex and the Konfrontasi Marker at Macdonald House. We also asked respondents to identify the present day locations of the Hock Lee Bus Riots, the Maria Hertog Riots and the 1964 Race Riots.

Of the 62 respondents, 8 knew where the Hong Lim marker was and 13 knew what happened there. As for the Kronfrontasi terrorist attacks, 26 out of 62 people knew that it took place at the Macdonald House at Dhoby Ghaut.

However only 1 of the 62 people who responded knew where the Hock Lee Bus Riots took place. Even so this one person who knew that the Hock Lee Bus Riots took place in Alexandra Road could not identify the present day specific location. Some knew that it took place somewhere "at a bus docking station" but none could pinpoint that its actual location was at the former Alexandra Circus.

Moreover, it was disappointing to know that 2 of 62 were confused that it took place at Chinese High, which was the location of the Chinese Middle School Riots.

Another survey showed that only 1 of the 62 people knew exactly where the 1964 Race Riots occurred, guessing that it took place "between Kallang and Geylang, near the former Kallang Gasworks".

Survey results - [http://goo.gl/2ESo5z](http://goo.gl/2ESo5z)

“A one of the new permanent plaques is the Rimau 10 Execution Site. ………. Ten commandos of the team who raided occupied Singapore to sabotage shipping were beheaded on 7th July 1945 in the vicinity of this site. The marker indicating their execution site is located close to the Dover Road entrance of University Town, NUS. It was installed today and when I twittered the impending installation, undergraduate David Tan went down to take a look.”

A 2012 excerpt from [http://otterman.wordpress.com](http://otterman.wordpress.com)
As for the Maria Hertogh Riots, only 4 of the 62 people knew that it took place "at the court house".

This shows that there is a lack of awareness on exact locations of past civil unrests that took place in Singapore.

A larger number of people knew what happened at the heritage marker sites of Hong Lim Complex and Macdonald House compared to the number of people who knew the exact location of three of the most important riots in the history of Singapore. Therefore it is possible to believe that markers can help promote the awareness of civil unrests in the past and strengthen national identity and social harmony in Singapore.

The Historical Groundwork on the Riots

1964 Race Riots

The Race Riots were a series of riots that broke out on the 21 of July during a Malay procession marking the birthday of the Islamic prophet Muhammad, and lasted between 2 time periods. The violence resulted in the deaths of 36 people and 556 casualties.

These riots were exceptionally significant as they were serious events of racial violence between the Chinese and Malays in Singapore. This event resulted in the commemoration of Racial Harmony Day to remind younger Singaporeans not to allow misunderstandings from racial perceptions from erupting into violent clashes again.

As mentioned in Albert Lau’s A Moment of Anguish: Singapore in Malaysia and the Politics of Disengagement shows that the procession began earlier at around 5pm "at the junction of Kampong Sooloo and Kallang Road" (See Source 1A)


Source A states that a group of “seven to eight Malays” broke rank from the procession, followed by another 20 people.

As mentioned in an excerpt from this book by Albert Lau, the riots broke out when “seven to eight Malays........broke away from a section of the procession” “at the junction of Kallang Road and Kampong Sooloo” This was a specific pinpoint of where the first riot first broke out.
With a corroboration with NLB’s e-resource primary source of *The Straits Times*, 22 July 1964, the source states that “out along Kallang Road, near the gasworks, at about 5p.m” (Refer to source 1C.)

We checked the location of the Kallang Gas Works with the town map of 1963 and it was situated in the junction of Kallang Road and Kampong Soopoo. This finding supports the earlier excerpt from *A Moment of Anguish* and hence proved that the riots indeed broke out at the junction of Kallang Road and Kampong Soopoo, which was near the Kallang Gas Works.

**Maria Hertogh Riots**

The Maria Hertogh Riots were a series of riots that occurred on 11 December 1950. The custody battle for Maria Hertogh (also known as Nadra to the Muslim community) was a highlighted event in 1950 when Maria’s biological parents came to claim custody of her from her guardian, Cik Aminah.

The riots broke out when the Muslims became enraged upon seeing kneeling before a statue of the Virgin Mary. Riots in Singapore lasted until noon on 13 December 1950. Eighteen people were killed alongside 173 casualties.
We initially thought it was at Cross Street as glimpsed in the pictorial book *Past Times: A Social History of Singapore*. This allowed us to have a rough idea of where the riots took place. But as we explored we realised that North Bridge Road is quite a lengthy road! We had to determine where along the road the riots took place.

Moreover, we were still lacking evidence to prove that the riots had intensified and started at North Bridge Road. There had to be a specific location or place marker where the riots broke out.

It was relatively easier to track down the riots because it was confirmed and easily identified that the riots occurred in front of the Supreme Court. In *Singapore: An Illustrated History*, there are photos of the riots in the foreground of the old Supreme Court. (See Source 2B) We moved on to corroborate with secondary sources such *Singapore - From Settlement to Nation pre 1819 to 1971*. (See source 2B).

Moreover, a final corroboration from a newspaper excerpt of 1950 of *The Strait Times* confirmed that the location was indeed at the Supreme Court, and not North Bridge Road. (See source 2C)


**Hock Lee Bus Riots**

The Hock Lee Bus Riots of 1955 started at the Alexandra Circus, Alexandra Road. Staged by the bus drivers of Hock Lee Amalgamated Bus Company, it resulted in stoppages of bus services and the death of a policeman and a student.

This riot shaped the Singapore Chinese Middle School Students' Union (SCMSSU), which also grew into the 1956 Communist Riots that brought instability to Singapore’s road to independence. Thus, the riot has a significance in reminding Singaporeans of past struggles reach the success we have today.

As mentioned in John Drysdale’s *Singapore: A Struggle for Success*, the Hock Lee Bus Riots protest took place at Alexandra Road (See Source 3A).

Alexandra Road is a very long stretch of road that extends across many streets in the Tanglin area. Thus, we embarked on more research, looking through even sources such as our textbooks. (See Source 3B)

Source B helped us to conclude that the riots had erupted at the Alexandra Depot, exactly where the Hock Lee Amalgamated Bus Company used to be.

We looked through maps that dated back from 1957, the most relevant that we could get our hands at the National Library. (See Source 3C). However, we could not find the Hock Lee Garages based on this map. It may have been demolished by then.

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**Source 3A:**


**Source 3B:**

Source 3B states that the students of Chung Cheng High School and Chinese High School gathered in hundreds at Alexandra Road as part of the Bus Riots.

**Source 3C:**


At Box C5, between Alexandra Road and Alexandra Circus, many empty spaces can be seen in between buildings and roads, suggesting the possible areas the Hock Lee Amalgamated Bus Company could have been demolished by then.
Since the source from Richard Clutterbuck's book (see source 3D) indicated students converged at Alexandra Circus to escalate the rioting. We concluded that the Hock Lee Garages were definitely near the Circus. We needed to confirm that the riots did indeed start at the Bus Depot. This, we found in newspaper archives in the National Library Board e-resource that mentioned the bus drivers picketing and resorting to violence towards the police at the bus depot. (See source 3F)

Source 3E:

RIOTERS BATTLE WITH THE POLICE, Straits Times, 13 May 1955, p 1.

Source 3E states that the Bus Strikers and "their supporters had flung bottles and stones at the police" at the Hock Lee Garages, which a sign of violence that indicated that the riots actually broke out there.

There were also empty plots of land after Singapore Cold Storage building and beside Clarence Lane. We decided to travel to Alexandra Road for any possible clues. To our surprise, the Chinese Temple (Kwan Yam Theng Buddhist Temple) that was in the 1957 Street Directory still stands today, and we took our chance by interviewing the venerable in the temple. This helped us to locate the exact site where the riot erupted. (See Source 3F)
The venerable was born in 1950. She said that she used to learn sewing at the unused bus depot in the 1970s. She remembered where the Bus Depot used to be which is now replaced by HDB flats at Clarence Lane, adjacent to the present Queenstown Secondary School. (See Source 3G)

Supporters gathering at the Hock Lee Bus Amalgated Company, also known as the Hock Lee Garages

Singapore: An Illustrated History, 1941-1984, Information Division, Ministry of Culture, 1984, p161

Source 3G:
235 Alexandra Road, a Housing Development Board Block now stands on the former Hock Lee Garages.

Source 3I:
Alexandra Circus today.

Source: Google Maps.

The "red block of flats", which is the presentation location for the Hock Lee Bus Amalgated Company Garages, is situated on the left of the circus.
Conclusion

If Singapore had not experienced and endured the struggles and conflicts during its embryonic stage, Singapore might not be able to witness the peace and prosperity we have today.

These riots serve as reminders to Singaporeans that such misunderstandings can happen again. As Singaporeans, we all have the duty to collect the memories and lessons of the past and ensure that these lessons are learnt by our children, such that justice will be done to the price paid by our ancestors for peace and prosperity.
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